

Uniting Through Diversity: The Power of Interfaith Engagement

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'Ekam sad viprā bahudhā vadanti' (God is one but the wise people/the sages speak of it variously) is one of the important philosophies of Hinduism which has laid on universal compassion, said Prabhuji Keshav Chandra Das, from the ISKCON and the Convenor of the Inter-religious Solidarity Council, Mumbai. He was giving the opening address at a meeting organized by IRSC on the theme of 'Religion and Spirituality: Pathways to Peace' on 20th June, 2025. The meeting was attended by over seventy faith leaders from different faiths including Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Jainism, Buddhism, Sikhism, Zoroastrianism and Judaism, together exploring the perspectives on how different faiths explain and view religious diversity or pluralism amongst human beings. Quoting the Quranic Ayat (Quran 49:13) "Mankind! We created you from (pair) of a male and a female and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other (not that ye may despise each other)", Irfan Engineer, said that according to Islam, diversity is God's gift. Religions, according to Engineer, can be used as a marker of identity. In that role, Engineer said, religion defines and determines boundaries of a community. When communities are so demarcated, religion is reduced to defining insider/outsider, and determining numerical strength of the community in terms of majority and minority. However, according to Engineer, religion can also be a source of universal ethics and values like love, solidarity, compassion, dignity of all living beings,

social justice and service to the most needy sections. As a source of moral values, religion can be unifying factor.



The meeting witnessed an overwhelming and unanimous reiteration from the different faith leaders of ethics of religion and shared values in all religions. These common shared values have historically helped societies and civilizations to be a bridge across cultural and religious barriers. The rich discussion was highlighted by the perspective from each religion on this diversity and how the respective religions deal with diversity. Most importantly, the faith leaders, explained that these values should be demonstrated in practice while our society grapples with complex religious conflicts leading to tensions and challenges to peaceful coexistence. The meeting also affirmed its commitment to explore ways to foster harmonious co-existence. The rich sharing from all religious traditions helped to work towards a vision and mission of the IRSC.

While faith leaders traced the spiritual resources and heritage of co-existence and shared values, Prof. Kavita Pai cautioned that solidarity of religious leaders must help address conflicts in a multicultural society like India. What is needed is peace making engagement and persistence to address real conflicts in the society. Prof. Pai read out a conversation with Mahatma Gandhi on the issue of cow slaughter between Hindus and Muslims. Gandhi reveres cow but makes it clear that he would not kill any human being to save the cow. He would rather persuade the Muslims to forgo cow slaughter. Gandhi would offer to sacrifice himself in order to save a cow.

Prof. Pai elaborated by citing her research in Ladakh where there was a conflict over a place of worship which the Buddhist community claimed was a gumpha and the Muslims maintained that it was mosque. This issue created tension in the society that lingered for 20 years. Prof. Pai pointed out that with the help of mediators, both communities adopted certain

common principles during the dialogue such as social justice, forgiveness, sovereignty of God and atonement - acknowledge the wrong by the perpetrator. The 20 years old conflict was resolved through dialogue.

Sister Muditha Sodder reminded that pluralism is indeed the keystone of Indian culture and it has enriched our lives. Sr. Sodder said that true religion teaches that God is within all human beings. She cautioned that religion couldn't lead to national integration/ peace and harmony but spirituality could. Sr. Sodder laid out four steps for harmonious existence – 1) Follow and have right kind of role models; 2) Study of basic and universal values in all religions; 3) Accept and appreciate differences; and 4) Accept that God was too large an entity to fit into any one religion.



The eminent faith leaders who were present in the meeting echoed similar sentiments. Ralphy Jhirad pointed out that Judaism emphasizes on pursuit of compassion, peace and justice in the world. Swami Devendra ji speaking from the perspective of Jainism underscored that not violence, but dialogue was solution to all problems. Jainism taught the principle of 'live and let live'. Firdaus Shroff reminded us that God resides in each of us thus it is important to be good and kind to all human beings in our day to day lives. Bhikkhu Viratna Mahathero from Bhartiya Bhikkhu Sangha emphasized that these good common values from all religions shouldn't be confined to interfaith dialogue in closed groups and halls but go to communities and speak to common people. Akshay Dilip Ambedkar, grandson of Dr. Babasaheb

Ambedkar and a doctoral student urged the participants to spread love, happiness and humanity through such fora such as IRSC.

Uzma Naheed, Director of IQRA Education Foundation, an organisation working for Muslim women, emphasized that knowledge about other religions is essential and helps to live in plural society. She believed that kindness and justice has to be extended to all communities beyond our own for peaceful coexistence in plural societies. Shaikh Naseer from the Ahmadiyya Muslim community urged that justice and equality is universal and the teachings of Islam was for everyone. Ziya Eshraghi reiterated that all religions taught us the same values. There was only one God who sent different prophets from time to time to guide humanity and teach new laws. We must strive for unity in the world and bring oneness of humanity, and work to eliminate prejudices, Eshraghi said. Peace could come through spirituality, according to Eshraghi. According to Syed Shakil Ahmed from Ahmadiyya Muslim community, we must praise the God and all his prophets and manifestations to inspire love. Mohammad Burhanuddin Qasmi traced misunderstanding and conflicts between religious communities to ignorance, and suggested that we all need to read all scriptures. According to Qasmi, mazhab was like a dress – an external identity. However, spirituality was more important and permanent. Salim Khan from Jamaa-e-Islami pointed out that central to all teachings was solidarity. However, solidarity needed to be put into action to help each other in the matters of wellbeing of the humanity.

Prof. Surinder Kaur from Guru Nanak College emphasized that it was equally important to turn words into action and implement the good values that were common to all religions. Prof. Kaur pointed out that this included standing up for people from other religions when injustice was done to them. She urged all the participants to take this message to people outside. Iqbal Singh Gill from Sri Guru Singh Sabha, also emphasized that Sikhism accorded utmost significance to service to humanity and equality of human beings.

Anant Rupa Gaur Das from ISKCON said that religion and spirituality were the wheels of the same vehicle. He clarified that religion was not the cause of violence. Das further said that it was essential to understand spirituality and apply it to day-to-day challenges. That would help transformation of the heart towards compassion. Sister Anju from Brahmakumaris also underscored that the teachings of all religions were similar. God according to Sr. Anju didn't discriminate based on religious identity. Peace and harmony, Sr. Anju further said, was within

each of us and all have to realize it through remembrance of our creator. That would help us to transform our ideas for the betterment of humanity.

Astrid Lobo also cautioned against essentialization of religious identity. She suggested that it was important to look at other identities. Religion could help us to grasp realities beyond our understanding. According to Lobo, there was a difference between debate and dialogue, and interfaith dialogue required us to be open to truth.

The meeting captured the essence of all sharing and suggestions into its vision and mission statement and authorized the core committee of the IRSC to finalise the statement in accordance with discussions and common agreements. It further resolved to implement the salient suggestions offered – including organising public events to popularize acceptance of diversity, address differences and conflicts arising from misuse or misunderstanding of religions, promote peaceful co-existence, educate people on prejudices and negative attitudes that they may be entertaining and counter extremism manifesting and expressed in religious garbs. The Advisory Council of the IRSC was expanded to include all those who gave their consent to be in it in order to better guide the IRSC. The participants later enjoyed solidarity dinner together.

The interfaith program was further enriched by the presence and contributions of the following individuals:

1. Stanley Fernandez, IRSC, CFTC
2. Pastor Devdan Tribhuvan, Christian Development Association; CFTC
3. Maulana Iqbal Chunawala, AIMPL
4. Alexio Fernandes, IRD - OLLC Orlem Malad and BCS
5. Brian D'Souza, Archdiocese Commission for Inter-Religious Dialogue
6. Clinton Montu D'Souza, Head of IRD cell- St. Anthony Church, Malwani
7. Edelweiss Quadros, Archdiocesan Commission for IRD
8. Melissa Nair, Inter-Religious-Dialogue Commission
9. Dr. Rewat Kaninde, JJ Hospital
10. Thomas, Bombay Catholic Sabha, Chembur Unit
11. Brian D'Souza, Archdiocese Commission for Inter-Religious Dialogue
12. Joseph D'Costa, Bombay Catholic Sabha
13. Fr. S. M. Michael, Secretary, Bombay Archdiocesan Commission for Inter-Religious Dialogue

14. Sameer Wagle, Mumbai For Peace
15. Dr. Sabir Sayed, Pir Makhdum Saheb Charitable Trust
16. Dr. Arif Umri, Vice President, Jamiat Ulama, Maharashtra
17. Dr. Anil Chaturvedi, Hindu Dharma Pracharak, Mumbai
18. Haji Mukhtar Qureshi, National Secretary Quresh Conferene
19. Harvinder Singh Khalsa, Rashtriya Sikh Morcha
20. Nasir Herekar, Ahmadiyya Jamaat
21. Dr. Astrid Lobo Gajiwala
22. Shirish Ramteke, Vishwa Leader
23. Mahvash Riwhani, Member of Bahá'í Community
24. Fr. Aniceto Pereira
25. Lalita Deonalli, Sadbhavna Manch
26. Prasenjit Shankarrao Telgote, Vishwa Leader Media
27. Amarjeet Kaur, Firstsource Solutions Limited
28. Uzma Naheed, Iqra Education Foundation
29. Salim Khan, Jamaat-e-Islami Hind
30. Prosper D'souza; Masarrat Ahmad, Ahmadiyya Muslim Community, Mumbai
31. BK Anjali, Brahma Kumaris
32. BK Praful Salvi, Brahma Kumaris
33. BK Satish Bansal, Brahma Kumaris
34. BK Bijal Desai, Brahma Kumaris
35. Bhushan Chandorkar
36. Adv. Dhanpal Jain;
37. Tariq Khan
38. Minal Nhur, IIWA
39. Mayur Yewle, Jiwan Shiksha Abhiyan, IRSC
40. Chandrakant Butle, Baha'i Centre
41. Shweta Damle, HALWA, IRSC
42. Neha Dabhade, CSSS, IRSC
43. Urmi Chanda, Seeds and Peace, IRSC
44. Dr. Firdos Shroff, MSU
45. Mithila Raut, CDRA, IRSC
46. Ranjit Singh Vohra, S.G.S.B
47. Kurush Patel

48. Fr Ronny Vaz, IRD Orlem Church
49. Shaikh Mukhtar, Freelance Journalist
50. Rohit Dubay, ISKCON
51. Kishor Bhagat, CSSS
52. Bhajan Singh
53. Mustaqeem Makki
54. Mohd Aslam Sayyad
55. Sajid Ansari
56. Hamid Ahmad
57. M.B. Qasmi, MMERC
58. Dr. Vaishali Ingle, BLKM